

# CranstonArc workers are on a tear

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CRANSTON — Everything and nothing.

That's Peter Perry's standard response when asked what he likes most and least about his job as a paper sorter.

But don't be surprised. Perry's view seems to be the norm inside the walls of 21 Palmer Ave. — home to Better Shred, a document-shredding business started this January by CranstonArc, a nonprofit organization that provides vocational training and recreation to developmentally disabled adults and children.

At Better Shred, 11 men and women with disabilities such as autism, cerebral palsy and deafness work alongside six nondisabled adults to sort and shred paper. They earn more than \$8 an hour and pay taxes on their earnings.

The business makes them self-reliant and its revenues reduce CranstonArc's dependence on federal and state grants and community fundraisers.

"Self-sufficiency is the key — whether it's for the individuals we support or for ourselves as an organization," says Thomas P. Kane, president of CranstonArc.

An equally important goal, Kane says, is to help preserve the environment. to 1,500-pound bales and sold to The shredded paper is consolidated into 1,200- be recycled. It ends up in upstate New York, in Pennsylvania and even as far away as China and India, which have large markets for recycled paper.

Wherever it may go, the good news is that it doesn't find its way into the 1,147-acre state Central Landfill, in Johnston, which is expected to reach capacity in two years. The Rhode Island Resource Recovery Corporation has proposed a 100-acre, \$70-million expansion to keep it alive until 2020.

"[Better Shred] helps keep the cost of paper down [and] it helps increase the life span of the landfill in Rhode Island," Kane says. "It's just all around better for the environment."

In a 7,000-square-foot room studded with security cameras, the Better Shred employees work diligently. Some work 20 hours a week, others work up to 40 hours. They're all dressed in light gray shirts that proudly display the business' logo — a safe, symbolizing security, bordered by three green arrows.

Richard A. Hulkow Jr., 21, of Johnston, works as a sorter. That means he is one of five or six people to sit around a table and sort piles of paper into two categories: colored papers go in one cardboard box, whites in another.

Hulkow acknowledges that the job can get monotonous, but he doesn't seem to mind. Occasionally he gets little treats, such as a ride on the truck with James R. O'Connor, the business director. They go from Providence and East Providence to Woonsocket and Newport to pick up bins of discarded paper. They visit various state departments, schools, private businesses, such as Tasca Auto Group, and universities, including the University of Rhode Island and the Community College of Rhode Island.

But one day, Hulkow would like to move on from his sorting job to work at the nearly 40-foot-long contraption that shreds 2,000 pounds of paper in an hour and compresses it into bales. He would like to wear rubber gloves and push paper over the conveyor belt toward the shredder. He would put on a mask covering his nose and mouth, to avoid inhaling paper dust. He would wear earmuffs to block out the persistent drone of the air filter.

William J. Lacross, who operates the shredder, says he has learned a lot by working with people with various disabilities.

"It takes me out of myself," Lacross says. "I'm doing something productive and I'm helping preserve the earth."

A typical workday goes from 7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m., after which the employees are free to go home.

Often, they choose not to. As a group, they attend concerts at the Garden City Center gazebo, or sometimes they go out for pizza or root beer. They love to dance — last Friday they went to the Mardi Gras nightclub. And they love sports — Hulkow, Gilbert P. Miner, 72, of Warwick, and several others participate in the Summer Olympics at the University of Rhode Island. In the past, Miner has won three medals in track and softball, he says proudly.

This Friday they will go to a Pawtucket Red Sox game.

"If [the Sox] lose, you don't want to come to work," says Paul J. Lotito, of Providence, a member of the support staff overseeing work at the sorters' table.

Lotito, who has been working with CranstonArc for a little over a year, has his own story to tell. He says he worked as a software engineer with various companies for 28 years, until he “got tired of the rat race.”

“I got greedy. I was buying a new car every year. I was taking trips every year,” he says. “I just bought bought bought bought bought bought.”

One day, he says, he woke up and said to himself, “I’m not happy.”

He knew he wanted to work for a nonprofit organization. And so he came to CranstonArc, where he makes a fifth or less of what he used to.

But he is happy.

These days he is teaching himself sign language so he can better communicate with some of his co-workers. They’re his family, he says. He talks to them, answers their questions and jokes around with them. Sometimes, when he finds them getting too distracted, he scolds them.

“Get back to work, work, work or you’re all fired,” he says, clapping his hands together.

Then he winks and they all laugh.